

**THE EMPLOYMENT
COUNSELLING AND
RELOCATION SERVICES
PROGRAM**

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Alberta Manpower.

INTRODUCTION

The Employment Counselling and Relocation Services program (E.C.R.S.) began during the 1971-72 fiscal year. The first family relocation, in April 1972, was the initial step toward realizing the main goal of the program: to assist residents of the isolated and semi-isolated communities of Northern Alberta to more fully participate in the expanding economic opportunities of the region.

The program was initiated in Slave Lake under the Lesser Slave Lake Special Area Plan of the Federal Department of Regional Economic Expansion. The program was under the Department of Alberta Advanced Education and Manpower initially and in 1983 departmental reorganization placed it under the newly formed Department of Alberta Manpower.

Persons selected for the program are those considered employable or trainable, but who require assistance to relocate, to arrange accommodation and to find work or training. The Employment Counselling and Relocation Services program assists the families with the cost of moving, helps employable family members locate work, and makes housing available at reasonable rates. The support, however, does not end there; the provision of social adjustment counselling is a vital component which is maintained as long as it is required. The counselling activity covers a variety of areas including home maintenance, landscaping, use of community services and the importance of regular school attendance. Counselling supports and directs the family's efforts to successfully integrate into the new surroundings.

RATIONALE FOR RELOCATION

Prior to 1950, northern Alberta was characterized by a number of isolated settlements which were quite separate and self-sufficient. While hunting, fishing and trapping were the main means of livelihood, many native people worked in small sawmills or were commercial fishermen. During the 1950s a trend to larger, more centralized sawmills and fish processing plants sharply curtailed the activities of small operators, which had a major impact on the availability of work. Furthermore, with the increased competition for wild game, resulting from previously isolated areas opening up to oil and gas exploration and tourists, people living in these small communities had little choice as to how they could support their families. Added to this loss of employment was the rising expectations of the youth. The overall result was major dissatisfaction among many community members.

Recognizing this basic problem and its social consequences, the Alberta government decided to offer assistance to northern residents in finding new jobs, replacing those now unavailable, or by helping them find employment for the first time. However, the Government realized that these problems would not be solved by increasing the flow of transfer payments, or by creating jobs through subsidization of businesses which were not self-supporting. The E.C.R.S. program was developed to assist families relocate to growth centres for employment.

AREAS OF OPERATION

The program is currently located in eleven northern Alberta centres: Slave Lake, Grande Prairie, Peace River, Bonnyville, Fort McMurray, High Level, Grand Centre, Whitecourt, High Prairie, Hinton and Lac La Biche. Participants of the program relocate from numerous home communities across northern Alberta. The Regional Office is located in Athabasca, Alberta

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

A very important component of the Employment Counselling and Relocation Services program is the provision of transitional housing. Houses are provided at reasonable rates to aid in the "transition" of the family from their original home to the new community. Otherwise, the cost of accommodation could create a barrier. The Alberta Mortgage and Housing Corporation provides the houses while E.C.R.S. supplies the counselling and maintains the overall direction of the program. The rental cost of these units is established according to a rental scale and is geared to the participant's income. The option to purchase upon successful transition is available to encourage permanent residency.

COUNSELLING AND ORIENTATION

Counselling and orientation services for relocating families cover a wide range of topics such as education, finance, health and general family life. The majority of participants have lived most of their lives in isolated communities where family life was close-knit and accommodation was very basic, with few or no modern conveniences. It is of primary importance that participants be trained in the use of basic appliances, central heating and other facilities. An introduction to the unfamiliar environment includes counselling in these areas:

Life Style - includes an explanation of regular work hours, formalized vacation periods, and leisure time activities.

Employment - includes career counselling, further education needs, and employer/employee relations.

Housing Maintenance - includes painting, landscaping, general repairing and preventative maintenance.

Urban Skills - includes use of automobile and public transportation facilities, community organizations, shopping, social services, school attendance, social relationships, and town by-laws.

Credit - includes obtaining and using credit, budgeting, and future planning.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT SYSTEM

The community support system comprises those social functions which are provided through the members of the community. In Native settlements, this encompasses physical and emotional support which, while often difficult to measure, is very important. When a person moves to a different area, the absence of friends and relations can have a negative effect on their attitude and performance. Thus, it is necessary to assist these people to join community groups, develop associations with persons in similar situations, and expand their options for social relationships.

The community-at-large may also receive counselling and orientation to develop a better understanding between themselves and program participants. Recognizing the differences in backgrounds of everyone involved promotes mutual respect and cooperation. The program counsellors work in this regard by initiating courses for the general community population. This activity is constantly expanding, often as a result of requests from community residents who are outside the program. Participating towns and cities are involved in joint planning of tenant selection, housing types and location of housing units.

STAFFING

Flexibility - Due to the highly variable nature of program activities, staff must be flexible in duties undertaken and hours worked. While the office maintains regular hours, staff are often contacted at home in the evening or on weekends to deal with problems that have arisen.

Abilities of Personnel - Employment Counselling and Relocation Services staff are not selected solely on the basis of formal education. Instead, experience in a helping role is the basic requirement: knowledge of Native culture and Native language is also most important. Persons selected as counsellors must have a broad range of experience, and a highly developed ability to deal with people in transition. Such staff is often difficult to find. Many staff members have completed a similar transition themselves.

THE PROGRAM - STEP-BY-STEP

Contact - Persons interested in the program can either contact a field office directly, or be referred by an agency such as the Alberta Opportunity Corps or by individuals such as social workers or training program instructors. Most people find out about E.C.R.S. by word of mouth. If the interest continues past the introduction, the program counsellors become involved with the potential participant up to and beyond the actual relocation.

Selection Committees - Selection committees are established in a project centre. The selection committees are usually made up of representatives from Town Council (or Boards), social service agencies and Native counselling services. The main objective of the committee is to approve clientele for the program based on program objectives and on information provided by the Employment Counselling and Relocation Services staff.

Assessment and Selection - After a family has indicated interest in the program, the housing counsellor prepares an assessment and makes a recommendation about selection.

When the program first began, the selected families were those in greatest need of assistance. The families were usually large and headed by older parents with little or no formal education. There were a number of obstacles to successful relocation including scarcity of employment options, difficulty in changing schools and a general lack of flexibility in adapting to new surroundings. The changes were often too great; consequently, many families returned to their original communities disillusioned and frustrated.

After this experience, the emphasis was shifted to families who could better adapt to the new employment and living environment. The families now accepted into the program tend to be younger with fewer children. Some are single parent families. Most adults have formal education ranging from grade eight to twelve. In many cases, both husband and wife have good potential for employment. The children are usually young enough that changing schools is not a major difficulty. Obviously, such changes are much more simple with fewer children involved. Younger parents with better education find it much easier to locate suitable employment or training opportunities; employers are more willing to hire younger people; and having some school education facilitates entry to apprenticeship and other training programs.

Under the new system, the families with the greatest need are not excluded, but their suitability depends on positive attitudes. In the past, some of the most successful program participants have been those who met the challenges of relocation head-on and made an effort to meet new people, fit into the social structure and constantly pursue good jobs. Large families, educational weaknesses and poor financial positions did not seem to cause these families great difficulty as long as they maintained a positive, aggressive approach.

Introduction to the Program - Once the family has been accepted, program officials determine whether transitional accommodation will be available by the time the family is ready to relocate. If housing is not available within a reasonable amount of time, the family is informed that they will have to wait for an opening.

If housing is available, the employment and housing counsellor visits the family and explains the program. Its benefits are outlined along with the obligations of the participants. These include regular payment of rent, maintenance of the house, as well as finding and holding a job. At this point, families who are still interested are given a more detailed exposure to the program.

Familiarization - if the family indicates a serious desire to join the program, they are brought into the community for a two or three day familiarization trip. They look at the community, its housing facilities and social environment, and try to get a feel for how they might fit into the new setting (accommodation and expenses are arranged by E.C.R.S. program staff). Then, they return to their home community to think about the relocation.

Employment - Once the family has made the decision to relocate, the breadwinner must either begin a job or look for employment. The employment counsellors provide assistance by locating contracts, making introductions and helping with the completion of job applications. After the participant is working, the counsellors continue their support by making follow-up visits to check progress and determining if any additional assistance is required.

When a person either has a job or is given a sound commitment by a reputable employer, the application is taken out of the pending status and processed. Obtaining employment or training is a requirement for program entry.

Relocation - the next step is relocation. Early in the relocation stage, the family is assisted in learning the operation and maintenance of a modern home. Instruction includes how to use a thermostat, how to operate an electric range, and how to care for a house. Counsellors also advise families in a variety of other areas to help them fit into their new surroundings.

The Canada Employment and Immigration Commission may provide financial assistance for workers travelling in search of employment, taking temporary jobs or undergoing training.

The Employment Counselling and Relocation Services program grants are arranged when other assistance is insufficient, or was not provided.

A grant may be made available to those families requiring basic household furniture. The maximum amount allowed is \$1,200.

Continuing Contact - Counselling and instruction support does not stop once the move has been made instead, it continues until the family is successfully relocated in all aspects. This support is the main factor contributing to the overall success of the program.

PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS

Since the program was started, more than six hundred families have been relocated. Moreover, the refinement of the selection process, has resulted in only a few families being evicted. It is also interesting to note that the majority of those persons who chose to leave the program have since returned to the project towns or other towns, and have found employment and accommodation on their own. Many of the clientele that have returned to their home communities have also become more involved in those communities. These individuals often sit on organizations such as recreation boards, community association executives or on the Improvement District Councils.

The employment rate for families participating in the program is usually at or above the national average. There are periods of the year when a low level of economic activity reduces employment, but there are also times when virtually everyone who is able to work is employed. This success in finding and keeping jobs seems to be a result of the emphasis placed on employment by the program staff, an emphasis which is part of the policy that employment must be secured prior to relocation. Relocation is only encouraged if the family's economic situation can be improved as a result of such a move.

Program participants are also successfully developing their skills. Some have entered the apprenticeship program in welding, electrical and plumbing trades. Others have taken basic educational life skills training and driver education courses. In some cases, these activities prepare them for better jobs, but training also allows the individuals to fit more easily into the urban society.

Since the approval of a Sales Policy for Transitional Housing (December, 1979), forty-four families who have successfully adjusted to their new environment have purchased their homes. The program also has the lowest rental arrears of any government housing program in Northern Alberta.

Program success is defined as family self-sufficiency through gainful employment. Initial studies have confirmed that approximately 80 percent of the families who have been through the Employment Counselling and Relocation Services program continue to be self-sufficient and of benefit to society.

ALBERTA MORTGAGE AND HOUSING CORPORATION

Since housing is a critical element in the employment Counselling and Relocation Services, the Alberta Mortgage and Housing Corporation has played a key role in the development and operation of the program. Officials of the Corporation have been active in the program since its inception.

The original houses in the transitional housing program were provided under Section 43 of the National Housing Act; as such, both the capital costs and any operating deficits were cost-shared by the federal and provincial governments. Later, additional housing was provided and funded solely by the Alberta Government. In both cases, rent is scaled to income. Although the onus is on the tenant to improve the house and property, the Corporation will provide materials such as wood for fences and paint.

The continual contact between program staff and officials of Alberta Mortgage and Housing Corporation is a unique feature of the program. Questions regarding maintenance, damages, repairs and rent arrears are handled at the field level, where they can usually be resolved quickly. When problems arise, officials are fully aware of the details of the problem, and will evict a tenant only after considerable discussion.

Any decisions regarding expansion of the Employment Counselling and Relocation Services are dependent upon the assistance of the Alberta Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The availability of building lots, the supply of homes for sale in a town, and the budget and priorities of the Corporation are all factors which come into play when expansion is considered.

PROJECT TOWNS AND CITIES

It was realized early in the program that in order to have a long range successful integration program the town or city council had to be included in the overall plan. Therefore, participating towns and cities are encouraged to be involved in planning, in tenant selection, rate of expansion, and design of housing units, whether the homes have to be constructed or are purchase already built.

UTILIZATION OF OTHER AGENCIES AND SERVICES

The E.C.R.S. program is not meant to be the sole provider of counselling and assistance to relocated families. The main reason for the program is to provide assistance not available elsewhere. The overall success of the relocation effort depends heavily on the services offered by other agencies including:

Alberta Manpower

- Opportunity Corps
- Career Centres
- Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Branch
(apprenticeship training)

Advanced Education

- Field Services Division (Community Vocational Centres)
- Various post-secondary institutions (Alberta Vocational Centres)

Other Departments and Agencies - Province of Alberta

- Social Services and Community Health (financial assistance) Employment Opportunity Program
- Economic Development (business information, economic growth patterns)
- Small Business and Tourism (Northern Development Branch)
- Agriculture (home economists)
- Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission

Other Governments and Agencies

- Canada Employment and Immigration Commission - Employment Centres (placement, relocation grants)
- Department of Regional and Economic Expansion
- Federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (relocation grants)
- Native Outreach
- Town Councils (planning, housing location, selection)
- Planning Commissions
- Friendship Centres
- Native Counselling Services

THE FUTURE

In the fall of 1977, as part of its decision to convert the Employment Counselling and Relocation Services to permanent status, the Alberta government requested the Career Development Division to prepare a long-term plan for the development of the program. Since that time, discussions have been held with the Alberta Housing Corporation to determine the approach for developing this plan.

It has been agreed that the following conditions should govern any program expansion:

- Future growth would be concentrated in towns designated as having considerable potential for employment.
- The program would be established in a community only if town officials were in full agreement.
- Any growth would be consistent with the program's capacity for growth as well as with the resources available to carry out the responsibilities.

A number of communities have indicated an interest in the program and are being considered in the long-range development plan. During 1983/84, expansion into High prairie, Hinton and Lac La Biche was finalized. Negotiations with other communities are presently underway.

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FORT MCMURRAY

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T9H 2K4
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LAC LA BICHE

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HIGH LEVEL

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PEACE RIVER

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SLAVE LAKE

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WHITECOURT

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HIGH PRAIRIE

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